

## **ABSTRACT**

**DISSERTATION:** “Yeats”: Fashioning Credibility, Canonicity, and Ethnic Identity Through Transnational Appropriation

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Over the last half century, the words of poet William Butler Yeats have been referenced in book titles, epigraphs, movies, television, and music with surprising constancy, asserting his place in our collective cultural consciousness. This study examines how and why these appropriations function to perpetuate Yeats’s elevated canonical status, provide a means of ethnic identification and legitimization, and enable the literary emergence of those who place their names alongside his. Through discussions of Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, W.H. Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and Alice McDermott’s *Charming Billy*, I examine the complex relationship between each text and the career of both its author and Yeats to demonstrate how and why Yeats matters. Yeats himself may have donned many masks, but his poems have themselves become masks, offering his appropriators a means of identification. For Irish Americans in the early twentieth century, he offered humanity and hope in the face of Norris’s Anglo-American prejudice; he provided Auden with a site to explore his own anxieties about the place of the poet and the role of poetry in the Modern world; he legitimized Achebe’s African narrative while also supplying him with a template and the resources to interact and critique Western conceptions of history; and, for McDermott, his early poetry embodied the dream of an idealized Ireland that plagued many Irish Americans throughout the century. Ultimately, it becomes apparent that Yeats affords both cultural capital and a productive site for exploration to authors and critics who utilize his name and work, crafting and maintaining his reputation while simultaneously shaping their own.